

THE ARTIST

A Drama Without Words

By

H. L. MENCKEN



SAMUEL FRENCH

Incorporated 1898

THOS. R. EDWARDS, *Managing Director*

25 West 45th Street . New York City

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BY H. L. MENCKEN

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THE ARTIST

CHARACTERS

A Great Pianist

A Janitor

Six Music Critics

A Married Woman

A Virgin

Sixteen Hundred and Forty-three Other Women

Six Other Men

PLACE.—A city of the United States.

TIME.—A December afternoon.

THE ARTIST

[During the action of the play not a word is uttered aloud. All of the speeches of the characters are supposed to be unspoken meditations only.]

A large, gloomy hall, with many rows of uncushioned, uncomfortable seats, designed, it would seem, by someone misinformed as to the average width of the normal human pelvis. A number of busts of celebrated composers, once white, but now a dirty gray, stand in niches along the walls. At one end of the hall there is a bare, uncarpeted stage, with nothing on it save a grand piano and a chair. It is raining outside, and, as hundreds of people come crowding in, the air is laden with the mingled scents of umbrellas, raincoats, goloshes, cosmetics, perfumery and wet hair.

At eight minutes past four, THE JANITOR, after smoothing his hair with his hands and putting on a pair of detachable cuffs, emerges from the wings and crosses the stage, his shoes squeaking hideously at each step. Arriving at the piano, he opens it with solemn slowness. The job seems so absurdly trivial, even to so mean an understanding, that he can't refrain from

THE ARTIST

glorifying it with a bit of hocus-pocus. This takes the form of a careful adjustment of a mysterious something within the instrument. He reaches in, pauses a moment as if in doubt, reaches in again, and then permits a faint smile of conscious sapience and efficiency to illuminate his face. All of this accomplished, he tiptoes back to the wings, his shoes again squeaking.

THE JANITOR. Now all of them people think I'm the professor's tuner. [*The thought gives him such delight that, for the moment, his brain is numbed. Then he proceeds.*] I guess them tuners make pretty good money. I wish I could get the hang of the trick. It looks easy. [*By this time he has disappeared in the wings and the stage is again a desert. Two or three women, far back in the hall, start a half-hearted hand-clapping. It dies out at once. The noise of rustling programs and shuffling feet succeeds it.*]

FOUR HUNDRED OF THE WOMEN. Oh, I do *certainly* hope he plays that lovely *Valse Poupée* as an encore! They say he does it better than Bloomfield-Zeisler.

ONE OF THE CRITICS. I hope the animal doesn't pull any encore numbers that I don't recognize. All of these people will buy the paper to-morrow morning just to find out what they have heard. It's infernally embarrassing to have to ask the manager. The public

THE ARTIST

expects a music critic to be a sort of walking thematic catalogue. The public is an ass.

THE SIX OTHER MEN. Oh, Lord! What a way to spend an afternoon!

A HUNDRED OF THE WOMEN. I wonder if he's as handsome as Paderewski.

ANOTHER HUNDRED OF THE WOMEN. I wonder if he's as gentlemanly as Josef Hofmann.

STILL ANOTHER HUNDRED WOMEN. I wonder if he's as fascinating as De Pachmann.

YET OTHER HUNDREDS. I wonder if he has dark eyes. You never can tell by those awful photographs in the newspapers.

HALF A DOZEN WOMEN. I wonder if he can really play the piano.

THE CRITIC AFORESAID. What a hell of a wait! These rotten piano-thumping immigrants deserve a hard call-down. But what's the use? The piano manufacturers bring them over here to wallop their pianos—and the piano manufacturers are not afraid to advertise. If you knock them too hard you have a nasty business-office row on your hands.

THE ARTIST

ONE OF THE MEN. If they allowed smoking, it wouldn't be so bad.

ANOTHER MAN. I wonder if that woman across the aisle ——

[THE GREAT PIANIST *bounces upon the stage so suddenly that he is bowing in the center before anyone thinks to applaud. He makes three stiff bows. At the second the applause begins, swelling at once to a roar. He steps up to the piano, bows three times more, and then sits down. He hunches his shoulders, reaches for the pedals with his feet, spreads out his hands and waits for the clapper-clawing to cease. He is an undersized, paunchy East German, with hair the color of wet hay, and an extremely pallid complexion. Talcum powder hides the fact that his nose is shiny and somewhat pink. His eyebrows are carefully penciled and there are artificial shadows under his eyes. His face is absolutely expressionless.*]

THE VIRGIN. Oh!

THE MARRIED WOMEN. Oh!

THE OTHER WOMEN. Oh! How dreadfully handsome!

THE VIRGIN. Oh, such eyes, such depth! How he must have suffered! I'd like to hear him play the Prélude in D flat major. It would drive you crazy!

THE ARTIST

A HUNDRED OTHER WOMEN. I certainly *do* hope he plays some Schumann.

OTHER WOMEN. What beautiful hands! I could kiss them!

[THE GREAT PIANIST, *throwing back his head, strikes the massive opening chords of a Beethoven sonata. There is a sudden hush and each note is heard clearly. The tempo of the first movement, which begins after a grand pause, is allegro con brio, and the first subject is given out in a sparkling cascade of sound. But, despite the buoyancy of the music, there is an unmistakable undercurrent of melancholy in the playing. The audience doesn't fail to notice it.*]

THE VIRGIN. Oh, perfect! I could love him! Paderewski played it like a fox trot. What poetry *he* puts into it! I can see a soldier lover marching off to war.

ONE OF THE CRITICS. The ass is dragging it. Doesn't *con brio* mean—well, what the devil *does* it mean? I forget. I must look it up before I write the notice. Somehow, *brio* suggests cheese. Anyhow, Pachmann plays it a damn sight faster. It's safe to say *that*, at all events.

THE MARRIED WOMAN. Oh, I could listen to that sonata all day! The poetry he puts into it—even into

THE ARTIST

the *allegro*! Just think what the *andante* will be! I like music to be sad.

ANOTHER WOMAN. What a sob he gets into it!

MANY OTHER WOMEN. How exquisite!

THE GREAT PIANIST. [*Gathering himself together for the difficult development section.*] That American near-beer will be the death of me! I wonder what they put in it to give it its gassy taste. And the so-called real beer they sell over here—*du heiliger Herr Jesu*! Even Bremen would be ashamed of it. In München the police would take a hand. [*Aiming for the first and second C's above the staff, he accidentally strikes the C sharps instead and has to transpose three measures to get back into the key. The effect is harrowing, and he gives his audience a swift glance of apprehension.*]

TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY WOMEN. What new beauties he gets out of it!

A MAN. He can tickle the ivories, all right, all right!

A CRITIC. Well, at any rate, he doesn't try to imitate Paderewski.

THE GREAT PIANIST. [*Relieved by the non-appearance of the hisses he expected.*] Well, it's lucky for me that I'm not in Leipzig to-day! But in Leipzig an artist

THE ARTIST

runs no risks: the beer is pure. The authorities see to that. The worse enemy of technic is biliousness, and biliousness is sure to follow bad beer. [*He gets to the coda at last and takes it at a somewhat livelier pace.*]

THE VIRGIN. How I envy the woman he loves! How it would thrill me to feel his arms about me—to be drawn closer, closer, closer! I would give up the whole world! What are conventions, prejudices, legal forms, morality, after all? Vanities! Love is beyond and above them all—and art is love! I think I must be a pagan.

THE GREAT PIANIST. And the herring! Good God, what herring! These barbarous Americans ——

THE VIRGIN. Really, I am quite indecent! I should blush, I suppose. But love is never ashamed.—How people misunderstand me!

THE MARRIED WOMAN. I wonder if he's faithful. The chances are against it. I never heard of a man who was. [*An agreeable melancholy overcomes her and she gives herself up to the mood without thought.*]

THE GREAT PIANIST. I wonder whatever became of that girl in Dresden. Every time I think of her, she suggests pleasant thoughts—good beer, a fine band,

THE ARTIST

Gemütlichkeit. I must have been in love with her—not much, of course, but just enough to make things pleasant. And not a single letter from her! I suppose she thinks I'm starving to death over here—or tuning pianos. Well, when I get back with the money there'll be a shock for her. A shock—but not a *Pfennig*!

THE MARRIED WOMAN. [*Her emotional coma ended.*] Still, you can hardly blame him. There must be a good deal of temptation for a great artist. All of these frumps here would ——

THE VIRGIN. Ah, how dolorous, how exquisite is love! How small the world would seem if ——

THE MARRIED WOMAN. Of course, you could hardly call such old scarecrows temptations. But still ——

[THE GREAT PIANIST *comes to the last measure of the coda—a passage of almost Haydnesque clarity and spirit. As he strikes the broad chord of the tonic there comes a roar of applause. He arises, moves a step or two down the stage, and makes a series of low bows, his hands to his heart.*]

THE GREAT PIANIST. [*Bowing.*] I wonder why the American women always wear raincoats to piano recitals. Even when the sun is shining brightly, one

THE ARTIST

sees hundreds of them. What a disagreeable smell they give to the hall. [*More applause and more bows.*] An American audience always smells of rubber and lilies-of-the-valley. How different in London! There an audience always smells of soap. In Paris it reminds you of sachet bags—and *lingerie*. [*The applause ceases and he returns to the piano.*] And now comes that *verfluchte adagio*. [*As he begins to play, a deathlike silence falls upon the hall.*]

ONE OF THE CRITICS. What rotten pedaling!

ANOTHER CRITIC. A touch like a xylophone player, but he knows how to use his feet. That suggests a good line for the notice—"he plays better with his feet than with his hands," or something like that. I'll have to think it over and polish it up.

ONE OF THE OTHER MEN. Now comes some more of that awful classical stuff.

THE VIRGIN. Suppose he can't speak English? But that wouldn't matter. Nothing matters. Love is beyond and above —

SIX HUNDRED WOMEN. Oh, how beautiful!

THE MARRIED WOMAN. Perfect!

THE ARTIST

THE DEAN OF THE CRITICS. [*Sinking quickly into the slumber which always overtakes him during the adagio.*] C-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-h-h-h-h-h-h-h!

THE YOUNGEST CRITIC. There is that old fraud asleep again. And to-morrow he'll print half a column of vapid reminiscence and call it criticism. It's a wonder his paper stands for him. Because he once heard Liszt, he . . .

THE GREAT PIANIST. That plump girl over there on the left is not so bad. As for the rest, I beg to be excused. The American women have no more shape than so many matches. They are too tall and too thin. I like a nice rubbery armful—like that Dresden girl. Or that harpist in Moscow—the girl with the Pilsner hair. Let me see, what was her name? Oh, Fritzzi, to be sure—but her last name? Schmidt? Kraus? Meyer? I'll have to try to think of it, and send her a post-card.

THE MARRIED WOMAN. What delicious flutelike tones!

ONE OF THE WOMEN. If Beethoven could only be here to hear it! He would cry for very joy! Maybe he *does* hear it. Who knows? I believe he does. I am *sure* he does.

THE ARTIST

[THE GREAT PIANIST *reaches the end of the adagio, and there is another burst of applause, which awakens THE DEAN OF THE CRITICS.*]

THE DEAN OF THE CRITICS. Oh, piffle! Compared to Gottschalk, the man is an amateur. Let him go back to the conservatory for a couple of years.

ONE OF THE MEN. [*Looking at his program.*] Next comes the *shirt-so*. I hope it has some tune in it.

THE VIRGIN. The *adagio* is love's agony, but the *scherzo* is love triumphant. What beautiful eyes he has! And how pale he is!

THE GREAT PIANIST. [*Resuming his grim toil.*] Well, there's half of it over. But this *scherzo* is ticklish business. That horrible evening in Prague—will I ever forget it? Those hisses—and the papers next day!

ONE OF THE MEN. Go it, professor! That's the best you've done yet!

ONE OF THE CRITICS. Too fast!

ANOTHER CRITIC. Too slow!

A YOUNG GIRL. My, but ain't the professor just full of talent!

THE ARTIST

THE GREAT PIANIST. Well, so far no accident. [*He negotiates a difficult passage, and plays it triumphantly, but at some expenditure of cold perspiration.*] What a way for a man to make a living!

THE VIRGIN. What passion he puts into it! His soul is in his finger-tips.

A CRITIC. A human pianola!

THE GREAT PIANIST. This *scherzo* always fetches the women. I can hear them draw long breaths. That plump girl is getting pale. Well, why shouldn't she? I suppose I'm about the best pianist she has ever heard—or ever *will* hear. What people can see in that Hofmann fellow I never could imagine. In Chopin, Schumann, Grieg, you might fairly say he's pretty good. But it takes an *artist* to play Beethoven. [*He rattles on to the end of the scherzo and there is more applause. Then he dashes into the finale.*]

THE DEAN OF THE CRITICS. Too loud! Too loud! It sounds like an ash-cart going down an alley. But what can you expect? Piano-playing is a lost art. Paderewski ruined it.

THE GREAT PIANIST. I ought to clear 200,000 gold-marks by this tournee. If it weren't for those thieving agents and hotel-keepers, I'd make 300,000. Just think

THE ARTIST

of it—twenty-four marks a day for a room! That's the way these Americans treat a visiting artist! The country is worse than Bulgaria. I was treated better at Bucharest. Well, it won't last forever. As soon as I get enough of their money they'll see me no more. Vienna is the place to settle down. A nice studio at fifty marks a month—and the life of a gentleman. What was the name of that little red-cheeked girl at the café in the Franzjosefstrasse—that girl with the gold tooth and the green stockings? I'll have to look her up.

THE VIRGIN. What an artist! What a master! What a ——

THE MARRIED WOMAN. Has he really suffered, or is it just intuition?

THE GREAT PIANIST. No, marriage is a waste of money. Let the other fellow marry her. [*He approaches the closing measures of the finale.*] And now for a breathing spell and a swallow of beer. American beer! Bah! But it's better than nothing. The Americans drink water. Cattle! Animals! *Ach, München, wie bist du so schön!* [*As he concludes there is a whirlwind of applause and he is forced to bow again and again. Finally, he is permitted to retire, and the audience prepares to spend the short in-*

THE ARTIST

termination in whispering, grunting, wriggling, scraping its feet, rustling its programs and gaping at hats. THE SIX MUSIC CRITICS and SIX OTHER MEN, their lips parched and their eyes staring, gallop for the door. As THE GREAT PIANIST comes from the stage, THE JANITOR meets him with a large seidel of needle-beer. He seizes it eagerly and downs it at a gulp.]

THE JANITOR. My, but them professors can put the stuff away!

CURTAIN

